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Palimpsests

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Palimpsests

Palimpsests of a thousand and two thousand years ago were parchments or other manuscript material from which one writing had been erased to give room for another. The existence of these double texts was due chiefly to the scarcity of materials. Waxed tablets, papyrus rolls, parchment sheets, and vellum books each served the need of the scribe. But they were not so easily procured as to invite extravagance in their use or even to meet the demand of the early writers and medieval copyists for a place to set down their epics, their philosophies, and their hero tales.

And so parchments that were covered with the writings of Homer or Caesar or Saint Matthew were dragged forth by the eager scribes, and the accounts of Troy or Gaul or Calvary erased to make a clean sheet for the recording of newer matters. Sometimes this second record would in turn be removed and a third deposit made upon the parchment.

The papyrus rolls and the parchments of the early period of palimpsests were merely sponged off — the ink of that time being easily removable, though the erasure was not always permanent. The later parchments were usually scraped with a knife or rubbed with pumice after the surface had been softened by some such compound as milk and meal.

This method was apt to result in a more complete obliteration of the text.

But there came men whose curiosity led them to try to restore the original writing. Atmospheric action in the course of time often caused the sponged record to reappear; chemicals were used to intensify the faint lines of the old text; and by one means or another many palimpsest manuscripts were deciphered and their half-hidden stories rescued and revived.

On a greater scale time itself is year by year making palimpsests. The earth is the medium. A civilization writes its record upon the broad surface of the land: dwellings, cultivated fields, and roads are the characters. Then time sponges out or scrapes off the writing and allows another story to be told. Huge glaciers change the surface of the earth; a river is turned aside; or a flood descends and washes out the marks of a valley people. More often the ephemeral work of man is merely brushed away or overlain and forgotten. Foundations of old dwellings are covered with drifting sand or fast growing weeds. Auto roads hide the Indian trail and the old buffalo trace. The caveman's rock is quarried away to make a state capitol.

But the process is not always complete, nor does it defy restoration. The frozen sub-soil of the plains of northern Siberia has preserved for us not only the skeletons of mammoths, but practically complete remains, with hair, skin, and flesh in place — mum-

mies, as it were, of the animals of prehistoric times. In the layers of sediment deposited by the devastating water lie imbedded the relics of ancient civilizations. The grass-grown earth of the Mississippi Valley covers with but a thin layer the work of the mound builders and the bones of the workmen themselves.

With the increasing civilization of humanity, the earth-dwellers have consciously and with growing intelligence tried to leave a record that will defy erasure. Their buildings are more enduring, their roads do not so easily become grass-grown, the evidences of their life are more abundant, and their writings are too numerous to be entirely obliterated.

Yet they are only partially successful. The tooth of time is not the only destroyer. Mankind itself is careless. Letters, diaries, and even official documents go into the furnace, the dump heap, or the pulp mill. The memory of man is almost as evanescent as his breath; the work of his hand disintegrates when the hand is withdrawn. Only fragments remain — a line or two here and there plainly visible on the palimpsest of the centuries — the rest is dim if it is not entirely gone. Nevertheless with diligent effort much can be restored, and there glows upon the page the fresh, vivid chronicles of long forgotten days. Out of the ashes of Mount Vesuvius emerges the city of Pompeii. The clearing away of a jungle from the top of a mountain in Peru reveals the wonderful stonework of the city of Machu Picchu,

the cradle of the Inca civilization. The piecing together of letters, journals and reports, newspaper items, and old paintings enables us to see once more the figures of the pioneers moving in their accustomed ways through the scenes of long ago.

The palimpsests of Iowa are full of fascination. Into the land between the rivers there came, when time was young, a race of red men. Their record was slight and long has been overlain by that of the whites. Yet out of the dusk of that far off time come wild, strange, moving tales, for even their slender writings were not all sponged from the face of the land. Under the mounds of nearly two score counties and in the wikiups of a few surviving descendants, are the uneffaced letters of the ancient text.

And the white scribes who wrote the later record of settlement and growth, read the earlier tale as it was disappearing and told it again in part in the new account. These new comers in turn became the old, their homes and forts fell into decay, their records faded, and their ways were crowded aside and forgotten.

But they were not all erased. Here and there have survived an ancient building, a faded map, a time-eaten diary, the occasional clear memory of a pioneer not yet gathered to his fathers. And into the glass show cases of museums drift the countless fragments of the story of other days. Yet with all these survivals, how little effort is made to piece

together the scattered fragments into a connected whole.

Here is an old log cabin, unheeded because it did not house a Lincoln. But call its former occupant John Doe and try to restore the life of two or three generations ago. It requires no diligent search to find a plow like the one he used in the field and a spinning wheel which his wife might have mistaken for her own. Over the fireplace of a descendant hang the sword and epaulets he wore when he went into the Black Hawk War, or the old muzzle-loading gun that stood ready to hand beside the cabin door. And perhaps in an attic trunk will be found a daguerreotype of John Doe himself, dignified and grave in the unwonted confinement of high collar and cravat, or a miniature of Mrs. Doe with pink cheeks, demure eyes, and fascinating corkscrew curls.

Out of the family Bible drops a ticket of admission to an old time entertainment. Yonder is the violin that squeaked out the measure at many a pioneer ball. Here is the square foot warmer that lay in the bottom of his cutter on the way home and there the candlestick that held the home-made tallow dip by the light of which he betook himself to bed.

In the files of some library is the yellowed newspaper with which—if he were a Whig—he sat down to revel in the eulogies of “Old Tippecanoe” in the log cabin and hard cider campaign of 1840, or applaud the editorial which, with pioneer vigor and

unrefined vocabulary, castigated the "low scoundrel" who edited the "rag" of the opposing party.

But most illuminating of all are the letters that he wrote and received, and the journal that tells the little intimate chronicles of his day to day life. Hidden away in the folds of the letters, with the grains of black sand that once blotted the fresh ink, are the hopes and joys and fears and hates of a real man. And out of the journal pages rise the incidents which constituted his life — the sickness and death of a daughter, the stealing of his horses, his struggles with poverty and poor crops, his election to the legislature, a wonderful trip to Chicago, the building of a new barn, and the barn warming that followed.

Occasionally he drops in a stirring tale of the neighborhood: a border war, an Indian alarm, a street fight, or a hanging, and recounts his little part in it. John Doe and his family and neighbors are resurrected. And so other scenes loom up from the dimness of past years, tales that stir the blood or the imagination, that bring laughter and tears in quick succession, that, like a carpet of Bagdad, transport one into the midst of other places and forgotten days.

Time is an inexorable reaper but he leaves gleanings, and mankind is learning to prize these gifts. Careful research among fast disappearing documents has rescued from the edge of oblivion many a precious bit of the narrative of the past.

It is the plan of this publication to restore some of those scenes and events that lie half-hidden upon the palimpsests of Iowa, to show the meaning of those faint tantalizing lines underlying the more recent markings -- lines that the pumice of time has not quite rubbed away and which may be made to reveal with color and life and fidelity the enthralling realities of departed generations.

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